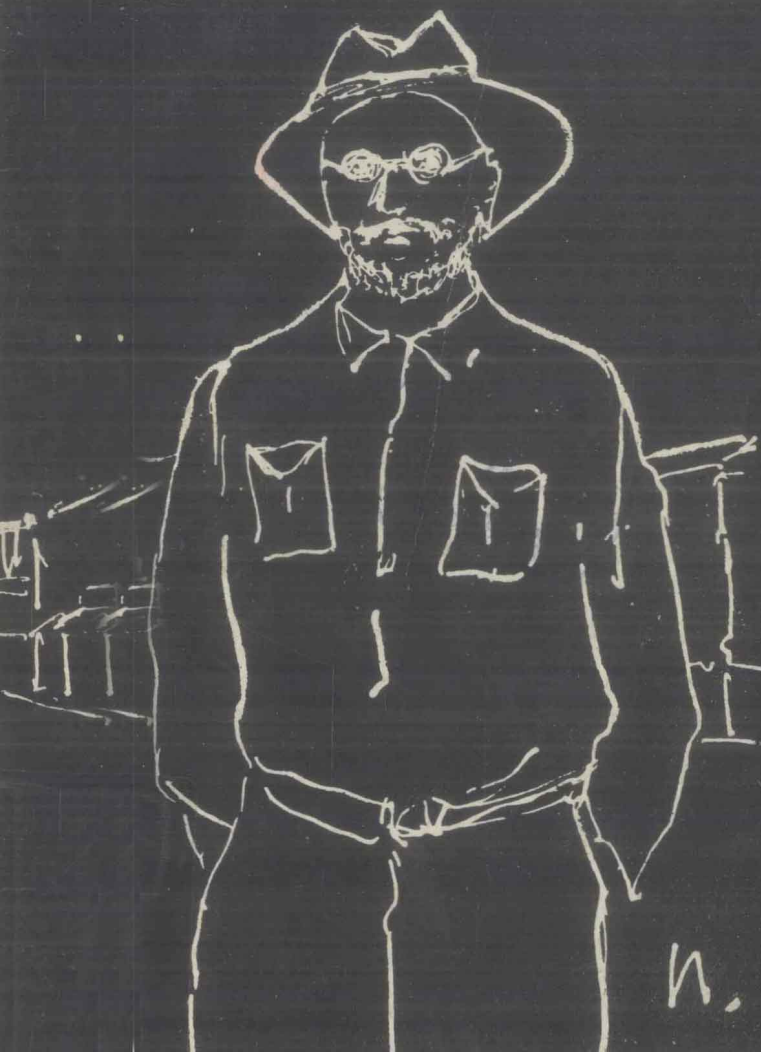




Penguin Modern Classics

# Patrick White Voss



## VOSS

Patrick White's great-grandfather went from England to Australia in 1826, and the family has remained there. Mr White was born in England in 1912, when his parents were in Europe for two years; at six months he was taken back to Australia, where his father owned a sheep station. When he was thirteen he was sent to school in England, to Cheltenham, 'where, it was understood, the climate would be temperate and a colonial acceptable'. Neither proved true, and after four rather miserable years there he went to King's College, Cambridge, where he specialized in languages. After leaving the university he settled in London, determined to become a writer. His novel *Happy Valley* was published in 1939; *The Living and the Dead* in 1941. Then, during the war, he was an R.A.F. Intelligence officer in the Middle East and Greece.

His other books are *The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Burnt Ones* (1964), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* (1970), and *The Eye of the Storm* (1973). Many of these have been published in Penguins. Since 1948 Patrick White has lived in Australia. He was awarded the 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature. His latest book is *The Cockatoos* (1974), a collection of short stories.



PATRICK WHITE

# VOSS



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FOR  
MARIE D'ESTOURNELLES  
DE CONSTANT



'THERE is a man here, miss, asking for your uncle,' said Rose. And stood breathing.

'What man?' asked the young woman, who was engaged upon some embroidery of a difficult nature, at which she was now forced to look more closely, holding the little frame to the light. 'Or is it perhaps a gentleman?'

'I do not know,' said the servant. 'It is a kind of foreign man.'

Something had made this woman monotonous. Her big breasts moved dully as she spoke, or she would stand, and the weight of her silences impressed itself on strangers. If the more sensitive amongst those she served or addressed failed to look at Rose, it was because her manner seemed to accuse the conscience, or it could have been, more simply, that they were embarrassed by her harelip.

'A foreigner?' said her mistress, and her Sunday dress sighed. 'It can only be the German.'

It was now the young woman's duty to give some order. In the end she would perform that duty with authority and distinction, but she did always hesitate at first. She would seldom have come out of herself for choice, for she was happiest shut with her own thoughts, and such was the texture of her marble, few people ever guessed at these.

'What will I do with this German gentleman?' asked the harelip, which moved most fearfully.

The flawless girl did not notice, however. She had been brought up with care, and preferred, also, to avoid an expression of longing in her servant's eyes. She frowned rather formally.

'We cannot expect Uncle for at least another hour,' she said. 'I doubt whether they have reached the sermon.'

That strange, foreign men should come on a Sunday when she herself had ventured on a headache was quite exasperating.

'I can put the gentleman in your uncle's study room. No one ever goes in there,' said the servant. 'Except, there is no knowing, he could lay his hands on something.'



The squat woman's flat face suggested it had experienced, and understood, all manner of dishonesty, but was in the habit of contemplating such behaviour from a dull distance since she had become the slave of virtue.

'No, Rose,' said the girl, her mistress, so firmly at last that the toe of her shoe thumped against her petticoats, set them sawing at one another, and the stiff skirt, of a deep, lustrous blue, added several syllables to her decision. 'There is no avoiding it, I can see. It would not be civil. You will show the gentleman in here.'

'If it is right,' her thoughtful servant dared to suggest.

The young woman, who was most conscientious in her needle-work, noticed how she had overstitched. Oh, dear.

'And, Rose,' she added, by now completely her own mistress, 'after we have talked for a little, neither too long, nor too short, but decently, you will bring in the port wine, and some of my aunt's biscuits that she made yesterday, which are on the top shelf. Not the best port, but the second best. It is said to be quite nice. But make sure, Rose, that you do not wait too long, or the refreshment will arrive with my uncle and aunt, and it would be too confusing to have so much happen at once.'

'Yes, miss,' said Rose, whose business it was not. 'Will you be taking a glass yourself?'

'You may bring one,' said the young woman. 'I shall try a biscuit, but whether I shall join him in the wine I cannot yet say.'

The servant's skirts were already in motion. She wore a dress of brown stuff, that was most marvellously suited to her squat body.

'Oh, and Rose,' called the young woman, 'do not forget to announce Mr Voss on showing him into the room.'

'Mr Voss? That is the gentleman's name?'

'If it is the German,' replied the girl, who was left to consider her embroidery frame.

The room in which she sat was rather large, darkened by the furniture, of which the masses of mellow wood tended to daunt intruding light, although here and there, the surface of a striped mirror, or beaded stool, or some object in cut glass bred triumphantly with the lustier of those beams which entered through the half-closed shutters. It was one of the first sultry days of spring, and the young woman was dabbing at her upper

lip with a handkerchief as she waited. Her dress, of that very deep blue, was almost swallowed up, all but a smoulder, and where the neat cuffs divided it from her wrists, and at the collar, which gave freedom to her handsome throat. Her face, it had been said, was long-shaped. Whether she was beautiful it was not at first possible to tell, although she should, and could have been.

The young woman, whose name was Laura Trevelyan, began to feel very hot as she listened for sounds of approach. She did not appear to listen, however, just as she did not appear nervous; she never did.

The keenest torment or exhilaration was, in fact, the most private. Like her recent decision that she could not remain a convinced believer in that God in whose benevolence and power she had received most earnest instruction from a succession of governesses and her good aunt. How her defection had come about was problematic, unless it was by some obscure action of antennae, for she spoke to nobody who was not ignorant, and innocent, and kind. Yet, here she was become what, she suspected, might be called a rationalist. If she had been less proud, she might have been more afraid. Certainly she had not slept for several nights before accepting that decision which had been in the making, she realized, several years. Already as a little girl she had been softly sceptical, perhaps out of boredom; she was suffocated by the fuzz of faith. She did believe, however, most palpably, in wood, with the reflections in it, and in clear daylight, and in water. She would work fanatically at some mathematical problem, even now, just for the excitement of it, to solve and know. She had read a great deal out of such books as had come her way in that remote colony, until her mind seemed to be complete. There was in consequence no necessity to duplicate her own image, unless in glass, as now, in the blurry mirror of the big, darkish room. Yet, in spite of this admirable self-sufficiency, she might have elected to share her experience with some similar mind, if such a mind had offered. But there was no evidence of intellectual kinship in any of her small circle of acquaintance, certainly not in her own family, neither in her uncle, a merchant of great material kindness, but above all a man, nor her Aunt Emmy, who had upholstered all hardnesses till she

could sit on them in comfort, nor her Cousin Belle, with whom she did share some secrets, but of a hilarious nature, for Belle was still young. So really there was nobody, and in the absence of a rescue party she had to be strong.

Absorbed in the depths of the mirror and her own predicament, Laura Trevelyan forgot for these few flashing instants her uncle's caller, and was at once embarrassed when Rose Portion, the emancipist servant, stood inside the room, and said:

'Mr Voss, miss.'

And closed the door.

Sometimes, stranded with strangers, the composed young woman's lovely throat would contract. Overcome by breathlessness, she would suspect her own words of preparing to lurch out and surprise, if not actually alarm. Then they would not. To strangers she was equable, sometimes even awful.

'You must excuse my uncle,' Laura Trevelyan said. 'He is still at Church.'

Her full skirt was moving across the carpet, sounding with petticoats, and she gave her cool hand, which he had to take, but did so hotly, rather roughly.

'I will come later. In perhaps one hour,' said the thick voice of the thin man, who was distressed by the furniture.

'It will not be so long,' answered the young woman, 'and I know my aunt would expect me to make you comfortable during that short time.'

She was the expert mistress of trivialities.

The distressed German was rubbing the pocket of his jacket with one hand. It made a noisy, rough sound.

He began to mumble.

'Thank you,' he said.

But grumblingly. It was that blundering, thick accent, at which she had to smile, as superior, though kind, beings did.

'And after the journey in the heat,' she said with that same ease, 'you will want to rest. And your horse. I must send the man round.'

'I came on foot,' replied the German, who was now caught.

'From Sydney!' she said.

'It is four kilometres, at most, and perhaps one quarter.'

'But monotonous.'

'I am at home,' he said. 'It is like the poor parts of Germany. Sandy. It could be the Mark Brandenburg.'

'I was never in Germany,' said the firm young woman. 'But I find the road to Sydney monotonous, even from a carriage.'

'Do you go much into your country?' asked Voss, who had found some conviction to lean upon.

'Not really. Not often,' said Laura Trevelyan. 'We drive out sometimes, for picnics, you know. Or we ride out on horseback. We will spend a few days with friends, on a property. A week in the country makes a change, but I am always happy to return to this house.'

'A pity that you huddle,' said the German. 'Your country is of great subtlety.'

With rough persistence he accused her of the superficiality which she herself suspected. At times she could hear her own voice. She was also afraid of the country which, for lack of any other, she supposed was hers. But this fear, like certain dreams, was something to which she would never have admitted.

'Oh, I know I am ignorant,' Laura Trevelyan laughed. 'Women are, and men invariably make it clear to them.'

She was giving him an opportunity.

But the German did not take it. Unlike other men, English officers stationed there, or young landowners coming coltish from the country for the practical purpose of finding a wife, he did not consider himself under obligation to laugh. Or perhaps it was not funny.

Laura Trevelyan was sorry for the German's ragged beard, but it was of a good black colour, rather coarse.

'I do not always understand very well,' he said. 'Not all things.'

He was either tired, or continued to be angry over some experience, or phrase, or perhaps only the room, which certainly gave no quarter to strangers; it was one of the rich, relentless rooms, although it had never been intended so.

'Is it long since you arrived in the Colony?' asked Laura Trevelyan, in a flat, established voice.

'Two years and four months,' said Voss.

He had followed suit when she sat down. They were in almost identical positions, on similar chairs, on either side of the

generous window. They were now what is called *comfortable*. Only the cloth was taut on the man's bony knees. The young woman noticed thoughtfully that his heels had frayed the ends of his trousers by walking on them.

'I have now been here so long,' she said almost dreamily, 'I do not attempt to count the years. Certainly not the months.'

'You were not born here, Miss Bonner?' asked the German. It had begun to come more easily to him.

'Trevelyan,' she said. 'My mother was Mrs Bonner's sister.'

'So!' he said. 'The niece.'

Unlocking his bony hands, because the niece was also, then, something of a stranger.

'My mother and father are dead. I was born in England. I came here when' – she coughed – 'when I was so young I cannot remember. Oh, I am able to remember some things, of course, but childish ones.'

This weakness in the young woman gave the man back his strength. He settled deeper in his chair.

So the light began to flow into the high room, and the sound of doves, and the intimate hum of insects. Then, too, the squat maid had returned, bearing a tray of wine and biscuits; the noise itself was a distraction, the breathing of a third person, before the trembling wine subsided in its decanter into a steady jewel.

Order does prevail.

Not even the presence of the shabby stranger, with his noticeable cheekbones and over-large finger-joints, could destroy the impression of tranquillity, though of course, the young woman realized, it is always like this in houses on Sunday mornings while others are at Church. It was therefore but a transitory comfort. Voices, if only in whispers, must break in. Already she herself was threatening to disintegrate into the voices of the past. The rather thin, grey voice of the mother, to which she had never succeeded in attaching a body. She is going, they said, the kind voices that close the lid and arrange the future. Going, but where? It was cold upon the stairs, going down, down, and glittering with beeswax, until the door opened on the morning, and steps that Kate had scoured with holystone. Poor, poor little girl. She warmed at pity, and on other voices, other kisses, some of the latter of the moist kind. Often the Captain would lock her

in his greatcoat, so that she was almost part of him – was it his heart or his supper? – as he gave orders and told tales by turns; all smelled of salt and men. The little girl was falling in love with an immensity of stars, or the warmth of his rough coat, or sleep. How the rigging rocked, and furry stars. Sleeping and waking, opening and closing, suns and moons, so it goes. I am your Aunt Emmy, and this is your new home, poor dear, in New South Wales, I trust that you will be happy, Laura, in this room, we chose the curtains of a lighter stuff thinking it might brighten, said the comfortable voice, which smelled beneath the bonnet of a nice carnation soap. It did appear momentarily that permanence can be achieved.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Laura Trevelyan, bending forward and twisting the stopper in the long neck of the decanter; glass or words grated. ‘I am forgetting to offer you wine.’

Then the visitor moved protestingly in his chair, as if he should refuse what he would have liked to accept, but said :

‘*Danke*. No. A little, perhaps. Yes, a half.’

Sitting forward to receive the full, shining glass, from which he slopped a drop, that Miss Trevelyan did not, of course, notice.

His throat was suddenly swelling with wine and distance, for he was rather given to melancholy at the highest pitch of pleasure, and would at times even encourage a struggle, so that he might watch. So the past now swelled in distorting bubbles, like the windows of the warehouse in which his father, an old man, gave orders to apprentices and clerks, and the sweet smell of blond timber suggested all safety and virtue. Nothing could be safer than that gabled town, from which he would escape in all weathers, at night also, to tramp across the heath, running almost, bursting his lungs, while deformed trees in places snatched at his clothes, the low, wind-combed trees, almost invariably under a thin moon, and other traps, in the shape of stretches of unsuspected bog, drew black, sucking sounds from his boots. During the *Semester*, however, he had a reputation for bristling correctness, as befitted the great surgeon it was intended he should become, until suddenly revolted by the palpitating bodies of men. Then it was learnt he would become a great botanist instead. He did study inordinately, and was fascinated in particular by a species of lily which swallows flies. With such

instinctive neatness and cleanliness to dispose of those detestable pests. Amongst the few friends he had, his obsession became a joke. He was annoyed at first, but decided to take it in good part; to be misunderstood can be desirable. There were certain books, for instance. He would interrupt his study of which, and sit in the silence of his square room, biting his nails by candle-light. The still white world was flat as a handkerchief at that hour, and almost as manageable. Finally, he knew he must tread with his boot upon the trusting face of the old man, his father. He was forced to many measures of brutality in defence of himself. And his mother crying beside the stove, of which the green tiles were decorated with lions in relief. Then, when he had wrung freedom out of his protesting parents, and the old people were giving him little parcels for the journey, not so much as presents as in reproach, and the green forests of Germany had begun to flow, and yellow plains unroll, he did wonder at the purpose and nature of that freedom. Such neat trees lined the roads. He was wondering still when he stood on the underside of the world, and his boots sank into the same, gritty, sterile sand to which he used to escape across the *Heide*. But the purpose and nature are never clearly revealed. Human behaviour is a series of lunges, of which, it is sometimes sensed, the direction is inevitable.

Fetches up at this point, Voss made a polite gesture that he had learnt somewhere, cleared his throat, and said gravely to Miss Trevelyan:

'Your health.'

She drew down her mouth then, with some almost bitter pleasure, again twisted the stopper in the neck of the decanter, and drank to him, for formality's sake, a sip of shining wine.

Remembering her aunt, she laughed.

'For my aunt,' she said, 'all things that *should* be done, *must* be done. Even so, she does not approve of wine for girls.'

He did not understand. But she was beautiful, he saw.

She knew she was beautiful, but fleetingly, in certain lights, at certain moments; at other times she had a long, unyielding face.

'It is fine here,' said Voss at last, turning in his chair with the greater ease that wine gives, looking about, through the half-

open shutters, beyond which leaves played, and birds, and light, but always returning to the predominant room.

Here, much was unnecessary. Such beautiful women were in no way necessary to him, he considered, watching her neck. He saw his own room, himself lying on the iron bed. Sometimes he would be visited by a sense of almost intolerable beauty, but never did such experience crystallize in objective visions. Nor did he regret it, as he lay beneath his pale eyelids, reserved for a peculiar destiny. He was sufficient in himself.

'You must see the garden,' Miss Trevelyan was saying. 'Uncle has made it his hobby. Even at the Botanic Gardens I doubt there is such a collection of shrubs.'

They will come, she told herself, soon, but not soon enough. Oh dear, she was tired of this enclosed man.

The young woman began to wriggle her ankle. The light was ironical in her silk dress. Her small waist was perfect. Yet, she resented the attitude she had begun to assume, and liked to think it had been forced upon her. He is to blame, she said, he is one of the superior ones, even though pitiable, those trousers that he has trodden on. And for her entertainment, she began to compose phrases, between kind and cold, with which she would meet a proposal from the German. Laura Trevelyan had received two proposals, one from a merchant before he sailed for Home, and one from a grazier of some substance – that is to say, she had *almost* received, for neither of those gentlemen had quite dared. So she was contemptuous of men, and her Aunt Emmy feared that she was cold.

Just then there was a crunching of soft stones, and a sound of leather and a smell of hot horse, followed by the terrible, distant voices of people who have not yet made their entrance.

'There they are,' said Laura Trevelyan, holding up her hand. At that moment she was really very pretty.

'Ach,' protested Voss. '*Wirklich?*'

He was again distressed.

'You do not attend Church?' he asked.

'I have been suffering from a slight headache,' she replied, looking down at some crumbs clinging to her skirt, from a biscuit at which she had nibbled, in deference to a guest.

Why should he ask this? She disliked the scraggy man.



But the others were all crowding in, resuming possession. Such solid stone houses, which seem to encourage brooding, through which thoughts slip with the ease of a shadow, yet in which silence assumes a sculptural shape, will rally surprisingly, even cruelly to the owner-voices, making it clear that all the time their rooms have belonged not to the dreamers, but to the children of light, who march in, and throw the shutters right back.

'Mr Voss, is it? I am truly most interested to make your acquaintance.'

It was Aunt Emmy, in rather a nice grey pelisse from the last consignment.

'Voss, eh? High time,' Uncle said, who was jingling his money and his keys. 'We had all but given you up.'

'Voss! Well, I am blown! When did you return to town, you disreputable object?' asked Lieutenant Radclyffe, who was 'Tom' to Belle Bonner.

Belle herself, on account of her youth, had not yet been encouraged to take much part in conversation when company was present, but could smile most beautifully and candidly, which she now did.

They were all a little out of breath from precipitate arrival, the women untying their bonnet strings and looking for reflections of themselves, the men aware of some joke that only the established, the sleek, or the ordinary may enjoy.

And Voss was a bit of a scarecrow.

He stood there moving woodenly at the hips, Laura Trevelyan noticed. She personally could not assist. She had withdrawn. But nobody can help, she already knew.

'I came here unfortunately some considerable time in advance,' the German began in a reckless lather of words, 'not taking into account your natural Sunday habits, Mr Bonner, with the result that I have spent the patience of poor Miss Trevelyan for the last three-quarters of an hour, who has been so good as to entertain me during that period.'

'That would have been a pleasure for her,' said Aunt Emmy, frowning and kissing her niece on the brow. 'My poor Laura, how is the head?'

But the young woman brushed aside all questions with her hand, and went and stood where she might be forgotten.